2012 | *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2): 42–58

Ethics and the "rough ground" of the everyday

The overlappings of life in postinvasion Iraq

Hayder AL-MOHAMMAD, *Keele University*
Daniela PELUSO, *University of Kent*

Beyond the stories of collapse, devastation, and moral uncertainty in Iraq's recent history there are tales of connections, relations, and the entanglements of lives which are named in forms such as friendship and family, and modes of comporting to others such as care, attention, and even love, which have yet to become part of how one thinks and writes about life after the invasion. In this article the authors draw attention to a picture of the lives of Iraqis as caught not merely in the forms and structures of tribal obligations and sectarianism, and the violence and destruction of terror, but also in the *rough ground* of mundane affairs and encounters. We argue that in the overlappings and relations of lives and intentionalities resides an intercorporeal ethics of the *rough ground* of the everyday. An ethics of the *rough ground* of the everyday is one understood not only in terms of the ways in which life is open to the pain, suffering, joy, and ennui of others, but in terms of how in the entanglements and relations of lives with other lives in the everyday, lines of care and concern emerge, are fostered, and also frayed.

Keywords: ethics, everyday, Iraq, Basra, moral anthropology

I was the first of my family to return to Iraq since we left during the early skirmishes of the Iran/Iraq War in 1982.[1] It was the summer of 2005 and I entered Iraq via Kuwait, as my intended destination was Basra, only an hour or so by car from the border. I was meant to stay with my uncle on my mother's side and his family; however, it was the height of summer when the heat exceeds 45°C almost daily, and the women of the family would be required to cover up in my presence.

1. This article is based on Hayder Al-Mohammad's fieldwork in Iraq, conducted between 2005 and 2012. Daniela Peluso and Hayder Al-Mohammad worked together on the writing of this article.

ISSN 2049-1115 (Online)

I could not bear the idea of making a family I barely knew even more uncomfortable in that intolerable heat, nor did I want to impose on a household I knew to be struggling financially.

Instead of staying with my uncle I decided to stay in a hotel near the center of Basra. Friends and family knew I was coming to Iraq, but none were told the date of my arrival as my plans were continually changing. When I arrived at the center of Basra I searched briefly until I found a hotel and checked in. As soon as I was in my room I called my father in London to tell him of my safe arrival and where I was staying. He thought I had done the right thing by going to a hotel and not staying with my uncle saying it was, "best to stay away . . . they have too many problems." I put the phone down and began to unpack. I had joked with a few of the hotel workers as I was checking in and already felt somewhat at ease in my new environment. I turned on the small television in my room to watch the news as I unpacked. *A series of explosions have rocked the center of Baghdad. Battles were ongoing in Najaf. A spate of kidnappings in Nassriya.* . . . The news was always the same in those days.

After a brief period of time my mobile phone rang. I looked at the number and to my surprise, it was a local one. Who could have my number? I answered with trepidation, "Hello?"

"Hayder? I'm downstairs"

That was the call. I had no idea who it was and must admit to being confused and slightly worried at the time. I took the stairs from the first floor to the ground floor hoping to catch a glimpse of who the caller might be. I did not recognize anyone out of the two or three people who sat in the lobby. From behind a pillar a middle-aged man jumped out at me, almost screaming: "Hayder?! . . . Give your uncle a kiss. What are you, English? Your father is a great man. . . . Your mother, she was too good for that man . . . you're fat . . . too fat . . . what's the matter with you?"

That was Abu-Hibba. He was sixty years old or so when I first met him. I found out later that my father had called Abu-Hibba immediately after speaking to me and sent him to check to see how I was, what the hotel was like, and generally to make me aware that I was anything but alone in Basra. Abu-Hibba's family had owned a shop opposite the one my father ran from the late 1960s until 1979. Abu-Hibba and my father were friends; they had not seen nor heard from each other since 1979—when my father left Basra to live in Baghdad and eventually fled the country until a week before I arrived in Basra. My father had managed to acquire Abu-Hibba's and several of his other friends' telephone numbers from Basrans living in London in order to tell them of my arrival. As soon as my father spoke to Abu-Hibba and told him I was in Basra, he arrived at my hotel.

Abu-Hibba took great care of me during those initial weeks when I first visited Basra. He checked on me daily by coming to visit me under almost any circumstance, even when rival gangs and militias were doing battle near the hotel. He opened his home and family to me; his family problems became my problems and when good news came to them I was one of the first they called to tell.

A few weeks after our initial encounter I was walking with Abu-Hibba eating ice cream in the evening and thanked him for his kindness and generosity. He responded with irritation in his voice: "You need to understand one thing: you're one of us. You're part of our family. Anything you want we will do for you, even if

we can't we'll try. . . . Your father and I grew up together. We were beaten up together . . . we fought and argued with each other . . . when your father left, a part of Basra left went with him . . . none of us ever forgot him. . . . We shared a life, your father and I . . . we fell in love and got married to our wives at the same time . . . and shared in each other's lives and happiness; that never gets forgotten, no matter how many years you and your father have been away. Your life is connected [*marboot*] with ours . . . so don't thank me . . . ever."

It has been in such conversations and moments that both authors have increasingly come to feel there is an account to be given of how in the overlappings and relations of lives and intentionalities an ethics of care resides in the *rough ground* of the everyday. Such an ethics repeats Wittgenstein's critique of the philosophy of language of his time in which the rarefied conceptual clarity of works by figures such as Frege and Russell and the Vienna Circle unmoored language from precisely the space it is resident and made intelligible within—namely, the everyday. In Wittgenstein's words: "We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!" ([1953] 2007: §107, emphasis in original). Hence, if in the philosophy of language we have to return language to where it is used and made intelligible, then an ethics of the *rough ground* of the everyday would be one in which ethics is neither judged nor understood against an ideal of the Good or extracontontextual imperatives. Rather, an ethics of the *rough ground* of the everyday is one understood in terms of the ways in which life is not only open to the pain, suffering, joy, and ennui of others, but also to how in the entanglements and relations of lives with other lives in the everyday, lines of care and concern emerge, are fostered, and also frayed.[2] Such an ethics, which resides in living-in-action—that is, as phenomenologically, experientially, and sensibly grounded—points to an obscure and dynamic understanding of social life in the south of Iraq whose horizon is not determined or limited by categories such as kinship, tribalism, Islam, and sectarianism.

Much research on Iraq since the invasion of 2003 has focused on the implications of the collapse of the Ba'thist regime (Barakat 2005; Ismael and Ismael 2005; Bensahel et al. 2008), the incoherency of the strategic ambitions of

2. In reaction to a perceived uncritical use of categories such as "ethics" and "morality" without clear analytical distinction between the two, Jarret Zigon proposes the "distinction between morality as the unreflective mode of being-in-the-world and ethics as a tactic performed in the moment of the breakdown of the ethical dilemma" (2007: 137). In another article Zigon talks of the "ethical moment" in contradistinction to "morality," which "is a moment of conscious reflection and dialogue with one's own moral dispositions, as well as with the other two moralities, it is also a moment of freedom, creativity, and emergence" (2009: 83). The equation here of "conscious reflection" with "freedom" and the implication that "dispositions" are constraining or limiting is not particularly helpful and falls into an uncomfortable metaphysical logic. We may well arrive at conceptual clarity with Zigon's distinction but this clarity comes at the expense of understanding and coming to grips with the heterogeneous phenomena of ethical life. Thus, to add to the list of what an "ethics of the rough ground" is not, it is also not an account of conscious reflection or how choices for "appropriate" actions are made.

the occupying forces (Allawi 2007; Boyle 2009; Katzman 2009), the rise of gender inequality and violence (Al-Ali 2005; Cardosa 2007; Al-Jawaheri 2008), and the destructiveness of terrorist attacks and the emergence and rise of militia and gang violence within Iraq (Al-Mohammad 2011a). Academic and journalistic accounts, which have insisted on highlighting the breakdowns, suffering, and destruction of the country have often ignored the much more complex imbrications of violence, struggles, life, and the everyday, which are not necessarily exposed nor become manifest in the devastation of terrorist attacks or battles between militias and gangs. Borrowing from Wittgenstein the notion of the *rough ground* of the everyday ([1953] 2007: §107), this article is not merely attempting to provide a corrective to some of the rather overblown rhetoric found in accounts of life in Iraq, nor does it merely turn to everyday life in Basra to give an account of some of the multiple ethical forms of coping and care that reside in everyday interactions (cf. Kwon 2010; Lambek 2010). Rather, this article turns to the everyday *as itself* where lives come together in complex ways and in which care, and also neglect and violence, ravel *and* unravel the entanglings of lives with other lives.[3] Thus, this article pushes— ethnographically and theoretically—for a broader understanding of ethics beyond one which happens to reside within the everyday, or is merely an aspect of the everyday; and it also attempts to move beyond the dominant paradigm of an ethics of the self, or self-cultivation (cf. Al-Mohammad 2010b: 434–40).

In the works of Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) the important move was made to insist that ethics is not some anonymous imposition of body techniques that blindly form ethical beings in consonance with social norms of how one should carry oneself, act, and behave. Rather, ethical selves are actively made and cultivated by persons themselves; furthermore, a whole set of technologies, apparatuses, and discourses are in play in this active formation of an ethical self. However, one area which seems to have received little interest from anthropologists researching ethics is how one can think of an ethics of the *relationship* or the *with* of social life (cf. Al-Mohammad 2010b). The etymology of "ethics" is in sympathy with the focus on "selfhood" particularly if one turns to the Ancient Greek *ēthikē* which is based on *ēthos,* a person's nature or disposition.[4] What is odd, however, is our ability as anthropologists to commit to a notion of human being as *ex*-centric (i.e., outside itself), or in the parlance of postmodernism, "de-centered," spatially and temporally, interinvolved and

3. Contrary to classic notions of ethics as somehow deriving from a specifically "human" nature, such as the one to be found in Kant's ([1788] 2002) *Critique of practical reason,* an ethics of the rough ground is one that is founded on precisely the lack of a uniting or unifying nature. Agamben puts it thus:

> The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would only be tasks to be done. (1993: 42)

4. *Oxford English Dictionary,* 5th ed., s.v. "ethike" and "ethos."

intersubjective; yet our notion of ethics tends invariably toward and centered on an ethics of the "self," or an ethics tied only to a specific institution (e.g., Cook 2010). Michael Lambek's edited volume *Ordinary ethics* (2010) is one of the more recent attempts to develop an ethics beyond social norms and rules and the ethics of the self. However, most of the essays within the volume do not engage with what an ethics *of* the "ordinary" itself might like look, focusing instead on aspects of the everyday to be engaged with in ethical terms.

Turning to Iraq's recent history below, we outline the context in which discourses about the social and moral breakdown of Iraq can be located in the political-economic shifts of the country. This focus on the breakdown and unraveling of life in Iraq is shown to limit our understanding of what problems and difficulties Iraqis have faced since the invasion of 2003. In the subsequent two sections we turn to minor events and encounters between several Iraqis in their everyday lives that highlight some of the ethicality and openness of life to the lives of others. These ethnographic vignettes develop a picture of life in postinvasion Iraq not caught solely in violence and the desperation of sectarian attacks, but in the complex imbrications and frictions of everyday lives making their way in the world. The article ends by briefly engaging with Erving Goffman's (2010) study of how individual pedestrians are able to successfully maneuver their way in the city without bumping into others. Taking some of the critiques of Goffman's privileging of sight over the body's practical sense, we push for an understanding of the way in which people in Iraq make their way in the world as an intercorporeal, and also an ethical experience.

The unraveling of life in Iraq?

On March 20, 2003, American forces stormed across the Kuwaiti border and began their race from the south of Iraq to Baghdad having the day before employed "surgical airstrikes"[5] on the suspected locations of Saddam Hussein and senior government officials. The bulk of the British forces were committed to securing the major strategic sites in the Basra Governorate, such as Iraq's only seaport, Umm Qasr, and the Rumaila oil field (one of the largest oil fields in the world), to prevent any major damage to oil reserves or infrastructure. Once secured, several brigades closed the two major road links from Basra to Baghdad to seal off the city from any organized threat from the Iraqi Army, and then moved to capture the city as well (cf. Gordon and Trainor 2007: 74–92). At the time there was an expectation that the heavily Shi'ite Basra would repeat in some form or another the 1991 post–Gulf War's active and armed resistance against the Ba'thist regime (Cordesman and Davies 2008: 93–98; Synnott 2008: 106–9).

There are at least two reasons why such an outpouring of violence against the regime did not occur at the time of the invasion. First, Iraqis were not to repeat the costly mistake of the intifada of 1991 in which an army weary from the recently concluded eight-year war with Iran and returning home from the devastating defeat of the First Gulf War, rose up against the Ba'ath regime emboldened by the soft

5. See Bisset (2003) for a conceptual and empirical debunking of the discourses of "surgical airstrikes" and "precision guided" weapons.

rhetoric coming from Western governments, particularly the Americans.[6] Basra was the first city on March 1, 1991, to rise up against the Ba'ath regime. Karbala, Hilla, Nasiriyah, Amarah, Samawa, Kut, and Diwaniya also joined in, with the north of Iraq also staging its own uprising (Goldstein and Whitley 1992: 29–65). That tens of thousands were brutally killed as the international community watched on was a chastening experience and indicated to many Iraqis that the British and Americans were not to be trusted (Davis 2005: 231–33). However, even if Basrans, and Iraqis more generally, were able to trust their supposed emancipators, the Iraq of 2003 was not the Iraq of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Weeks after the end of the first Gulf War a special UN mission to Iraq wrote a report stating the following:

> It should, however, be said at once that nothing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation which has now befallen the country. The recent conflict had wrought near-apocalyptic results upon what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society. Now, most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has, for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology. (Ahtisaari 1991)[7]

Second, many Iraqis were not sure in those initial days that the Saddam government had been toppled and the Ba'athists neutralized. The Ba'athist regime had managed to inveigle its way into almost every aspect of life in the country—the privacy of home life included—and as weak and limited as the Ba'thists may have seemed to the international media and its consumers, Iraqis had granted Saddam an almost omnipotent-like quality (cf. Makiya 1989: 270–75). Living under the totalitarianism of Ba'athism since 1968, and within the bubble and desperation of the war and sanction years, Iraqi friends and acquaintances of mine have described how they did not know what it was they wanted after Saddam had gone because many had given up hope that he and his family would ever leave power.

What did occur as soon as British forces had secured the city of Basra was the beginning of what became a national phenomenon: looting. Saddam had called the war of 2003 the "Harb Al-Hawasim" (i.e., the Final War); once the looting began Iraqis immediately renamed the looted goods and those who stole and illegally built temporary homes on private or government land "al-hawasim." Patrick Cockburn writes that the initial phase of the looting contained "a social revolutionary ferocity in the robbery and destruction that now swept the country" (2009:

6. In his speech on February 1, 1991, President George H. W. Bush declared the "Iraqis need to take matters into their own hands and force their dictatorial leader to step aside" (Dannreuther 1992: 63). Exactly one month later, on March 1, 1991, the uprisings broke out with many Iraqis thinking they would receive financial and military support from the United States, which ultimately, they did not.

7. In 1991, an article in *The New York Times* that covered the UN Ahtisaari Report explains that the US administration's view at the time was that "by making life uncomfortable for the Iraqi people it [i.e., sanctions] would eventually encourage them to remove President Saddam Hussein from power." (Lewis 1991:1)

161). Along similar lines criminologists Green and Ward (2009) have claimed that impoverished Iraqi looters targeted the homes of Ba'athist leaders both in acts of political revenge but also to satisfy long accumulated material needs. If there was a "revolutionary force" initially behind the criminality it soon dissipated as organized gangs took over the thievery. Not to be left out, sectarian and political groups also joined the free-for-all, especially Muqtada Sadr's own private militia, the Sadrists. By early May 2003 Muqtada Sadr (who publicly decried sectarian killings) issued the "al-Hawasim" *fatwah* decreeing that looters could retain their stolen property as long as they made a contribution of 20 percent of the value of the looted goods (*khums*) to their local Sadrist office. Many of the wealthier and more powerful Shi'ite drew the conclusion that al-Sadr was little more than a gang boss and distinguishing between the "political" actions of the Sadrists from those of ordinary criminal gangs was not always easy.

Coming out of the horrendous experience of sanctions and the bombardment of the 2003 invasion, many Iraqis felt that the experience of widespread looting, the explosion in the number of murders and violence that seemed to have no explicit political aim—nor the anti-Ba'athist vengeful focus as was claimed by many journalists and commentators—pointed to a moral corruption within Iraq itself. Statements such as "How else does someone like Saddam stay in power for so long if we aren't somehow to blame as well" became commonplace within the country, which pointed to either an inherent corruption within Iraqi social life itself, or, at least, a wide complicity of Iraqis themselves that sustained the brutality of Ba'athist violence. In more theological terms, friends would remark, "Who killed the Hussain?" referring to the fact that the Prophet Mohammad's grandson Imam Hussein was martyred in Iraq signaling the long history of violence within the country and also the refusal to stand with "good" against "evil" by its citizens.

It is against the backdrop of the violence of militias, gangs, and terrorists, and stories of the breakdown of the social in Iraq that I first arrived in Basra on that summer's day in 2005. The heading of this section, "the unraveling of life in Iraq?" is taken from journalist Farnaz Fassihi's (2009) book in which she recounts personal accounts of everyday life in the country in the peak of the violence. As she stresses the violence, the breakdown in the socio-political apparatuses of everyday life, and the suffering that Iraqis have endured for decades, Fassihi, like many who have written on Iraq, gives a compelling account of how lives have unraveled under such pressures. But, life has not stopped in Iraq; Iraqis do not make their way in the everyday as simply victims or despondent souls. More complex and nuanced stories are required of how life was still possible in Iraq after the invasion, and how Iraqis and those outside the country contributed not only to the devastation but also to the conditions of life within the country.

Hence, beyond the stories of collapse, devastation, and moral uncertainty in Iraq's recent history there are tales of connections, relations, and the entanglements of lives that are named in forms such as friendship and family and modes of comporting to others such as care, attention, and even love, which have yet to become part of how one thinks and writes about life after the invasion. There are other relations and entanglements that we have no satisfactory language for as anthropologists, which exist in our haphazard and contingent engagements in the "hurly-burly" of the everyday (Wittgenstein 1967: §567). It is this picture of the lives of Iraqis as not caught in the forms and structures of tribal obligations and

sectarianism, and the violence and destruction of terror, but in the *rough ground* of mundane affairs and encounters, which clears a space to think of the care and ethics of daily life in Iraq. Such a narrative, however, does not do away with the politics, suffering, and history of the country; it indicates, rather, the thinness of thinking only of the unraveling of life in Iraq without also accounting for its ravelings as well—ravelings which are not merely counterpoised to violence and suffering, but which emerge from, through, and even against them.

It is important to clarify the everyday here is not opposed to the eventful and the outbursts of violence and destruction. An ethics of everyday life seeks to move past the disjunction of events/moments and the everyday to allow for an appreciation of the everyday itself as *eventful* (Das 2007: 6–9; Stewart 2007: 16–19, 48, 98–99). Instead of life, as such, unraveling in postinvasion Iraq, specific forms of life, or complexes of entanglements, were certainly undone or became looser in those periods, particularly as tribal, sectarian and nonsectarian groups, and gangs mobilized during the period of the collapse of the Saddam regime to gain power (cf. Dawod 2003; Al-Mohammad 2010a; Al-Mohammad 2011b). The rise and proliferation of Shi'ite, Sunni, and other political organizations and militias in Iraq after 2003 in no meaningful way translated into attempts to take on the vital work of securing basic forms of healthcare, security, or even basic provisions for the poorest in the country. Allied forces constituted reconstruction teams to aid with the transition to Iraqi self-determination and governance with mixed success and great controversy (Barakat 2005; Ismael and Ismael 2005; Cardosa 2007). However, if one turns to the everyday in Iraq one can find small gestures, moments of kindness and care, which are not simply positive tales contained within the destruction of postinvasion Iraq, but are the very grounds by which many Iraqis have been able to survive and live through the terror and uncertainty of the last decade.

It is to this world of gestures, moments of recognition, small acts of generosity, and the slow intertwining of lives with other lives in the everyday that we now move. The series of events and exchanges recounted below (which took place over several years) point to the precariousness and faintness of the ethics and care of everyday life, which is not located in one phenomena but exists only along the distributions and movements of lives entangled in the lives of others in the everyday.

Lives entangled and ethics

One evening in the spring of 2009, Abu-Hibba chose not to join our group of friends for dinner. He rarely came with us to this particular restaurant even though the food is usually very good and we all know the owner and had become friends with the staff. Abu-Hibba had driven us in his old car to the restaurant and suddenly made his excuses to leave. We mocked him as we got out of his car for being too old (at the age of sixty-five) to stay out late in the evening. He ignored our comments and drove away. We had become used to Abu-Hibba not staying for dinner when we ate at this restaurant so we quickly moved on to talk about the rise in the numbers of killings and crime in the city. Eventually, I got up to talk with the cook who stood over the grill to tell him of our order and to have a chat with him. We usually share a few jokes with one another and discuss the well being of mutual friends in Basra. This evening was somewhat different. The cook, Abu-

Sabar, asked to speak to me privately. We went round the back where nobody could hear us. "I need to see you tomorrow, it's very important." I asked what the matter was but Abu-Sabar insisted it wait until tomorrow.

The next day I met Abu-Sabar at a friend's shop. Immediately he took out a wad of Iraqi dinars and gave it to me. "I've seen you with Abu-Hibba all over Basra, I know you are very close to one another. . . . A year or two ago I could not afford to pay my rent and the landlord wanted to kick me and my family out onto the street. We lost whatever money we had. . . . What could I do?" I interrupted Sabar asking what this had to do with Abu-Hibba and me. "I don't know how Abu-Hibba heard about the problem but he went and paid my rent behind my back . . . he did it for three months. It took me a long time to find out who did it . . . but it was him." I was somewhat incredulous because I was aware of how little money Abu-Hibba had and how paltry the sum of money was that he received bimonthly for his pension. I asked Abu-Sabar if he knew Abu-Hibba well, or was related to him. "No . . . we worked together in the Fertilizer Company for years . . . spoke to one another regularly. . . . I knew him, of course . . . but we had no relationship outside work other than saying hello to one another if we bumped into each other in the market or a wedding."

That same day I went to Abu-Hibba's home to give him his money. He looked at me and asked what the money was for. "It's from a friend . . . Abu-Sabar." Abu-Hibba shook his head: "He shouldn't have given you this." I joked with Abu-Hibba that if he had so much money to pay other people's rent maybe he could give me a few hundred dollars. Abu-Hibba has never been much for talking but on this occasion he wanted me to know about what happened. A distant cousin of his who I had met on several occasions was Abu-Sabar's landlord. He had contacted Abu-Hibba to ask if he knew of any possible tenants looking for a house to rent near old Basra, as he was soon to evict Abu-Sabar and his family for not paying their rent. "When I talked to my wife and daughters we all saw ourselves in their position. . . . We just couldn't eat knowing that they would be on the streets or hiding in a small shack—how could you expect us to let that happen? I'm not religious Hayder. . . . I've never prayed and I drink [alcohol] . . . but these people we've grown up and lived with, we have to try to take care of each other as much as we can."

In living with and sharing a life in the everyday of work, lines of care and interest emerge almost unrecognized. Abu-Hibba and Abu-Sabar came to know of each other through glances or brief moments of interaction only, but in these meetings and encounters the slow entangling of their lives takes place. This entangling of lives that manifests through interest, attention, or small gestures of politeness—which has no formal account as an ethics of the everyday within the social sciences—indicates movements, understandings, and encounters of lives that exist beyond the monopoly that Islam, sectarian and religious identities, or social forms and structures such as tribalism, enjoy within studies of the Middle East. Not only is life something which cannot be merely encompassed by social and cultural institutions, ethics itself as the inclination of life toward others exists both prior to and beyond the forms of existence and rationalizations of institutions (Benson and O'Neill 2007; Baracchi 2008: 7–9). Emmanuel Levinas writes that as first philosophy, "ethics cannot itself legislate for society or produce rules of conduct whereby society might be revolutionized or transformed. . . . [Ethics] hardens its skin as

soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal 'third'—the world of government, institutions, tribunals, schools, committees, and so on" (Levinas and Kearney 1986: 29–30). However, in the anthropology of ethics, which has raised to such prominence the institutional discourses and practices of self-formation, the everyday of life in Basra is one where violence and the struggles of militias and gangs also intersects with the movements of everyday life, care and interest, joy and monotony, and also the proximal frictions and tensions between friends, family members, and acquaintances.

Months later I was sitting and talking with Abu-Hibba and several friends about visiting the family of an acquaintance who had died the previous day. Abu-Talal, a middle-aged man who runs a small shop in Basra that sells stationery talked of the *wajab* ("duty") one had of paying respect to the deceased and his family. I recalled at the time Wilfred Sellars' (1963) felicitous phrase *fraught with "ought"*—in social action and discourse, does there come a silent claim on the other?—but I remained quiet throughout the conversation, caught as I was briefly by my mental wanderings back to the academy. Abu-Hibba broke the late afternoon torpor with a set of challenges: "Don't any of you come to my funeral out of *wajab*. You're absolved of that. I've buried a sister who raised me . . . showed me love. . . . I buried two of my nephews who I protected with my own life when our house was under attack. . . . I buried friends who were more important than any brother ever could be to me. . . . I went to their funerals because they are all we have. . . . What is my life without all of you here?" Almost correcting himself, Abu-Talal jumped in. He spoke of his heart disease, the fear he had of dying, but also that his death would be one that people dear to him would come to his funeral to grieve and remember him: "On this dirt and under this sky we've lived all our lives . . . we suffered for decades but also we cared for each other."

The conversation moved on to how each person's life was reliant on the faint and barely perceptible gestures, actions, and moves made to open possibilities for others or to shield loved ones and acquaintances from threat. But more than that, and much more difficult to locate, was the sense that their lives are caught in the hopes, ambitions, and thoughts of others. A small gesture common among my Basran friends was to buy a bag of fruit or sweets and simply to drop them off at someone's house. One might say to a friend: "The apples looked good today and we couldn't enjoy them if you did not eat them as well." It would be easy to think of the fruits or sweets as symbols or externalizations of the care one has for others; beyond such an understanding there is an indication that joy and pleasure do not merely reside within our own skin, but are caught in the experiences of others intimate to us as well.[8] This is one of the ways to understand Zygmunt Bauman's

8. Agamben, writing on the ontology of friendship within Aristotole's *Nicomachean ethics*, picks out the ethicality of the entwinement of beings and sensation when he writes that there is a

> sensation, specifically a human one, that takes the form of a joint sensation, or a con-sent (*synaisthanesthai*) with the existence of the friend. *Friendship is the instance of this "con-sentiment" of the existence of the friend within the sentiment of existence itself.* But this means that friendship has an ontological and political status. The sensation of being is, in fact, always already both divided and "con-divided" [*con-divisa*,

theoretical framing when he suggests that "moral behaviour is conceivable only in the context of coexistence, of 'being-with-others,' that is, a social context" (1989: 180). That is, the claim of life being caught in the lives of others is not simply a metaphysical claim, but more basically, a claim of the ethicality of everyday sociality.

The ethics and intercorporeality of everyday life-trajectories

In his recent book Edward Casey (2007) dedicates a chapter to the ethics of the glance as a way of thinking precisely about what an ethics of everyday life might be grounded in. Casey highlights the dynamics and responsiveness of everyday ethical life by, for instance, the way one's attention is drawn by the sound of someone screaming, or seeing someone unbalanced and about to fall. Such experiences can sometimes draw us outside of ourselves into states of affairs, situations, or to persons we might be able to help. Pretheoretically, the possibility of someone in need of help makes a claim on me; it asks, or maybe even demands, a response from me. Casey also draws attention to another ethical world usually hidden that passes us by in our everyday lives; not merely the world of interior psychological life, but the visible yet barely recognized movements and gestures of care, love, attention, and all the other faint inclinations of life toward the lives of others. Take, for instance, the example of someone holding the door open for another person, or the briefest of smiles as someone walks past another person.

One of the ways to develop on Casey's important intuitions about the ethicality of everyday life is through Erving Goffman's (2010) acute analyses in *Relations in public*. In his account of the rules and modes of conduct that govern pedestrians walking down a busy street, Goffman tries to locate the implicit norms and modes by which pedestrians do not continually bump into one another. Goffman argues pedestrians are, through varying forms, in continual communication with other pedestrians: they use glances, feints of the shoulder, or avert the sight of others if they simply want to maintain their own line. The body is used as a medium of expression to allow others on the street to see where one body wants to go (what Goffman calls "body gloss" [2010: 11]) so other bodies can modulate and respond to both avoid a collision and still maintain their own progression down the street.

Nick Crossley (1995) and Tim Ingold (2004) both give different expositions of Goffman's failure to recognize the practical sense (*sens practique*) the body has of other bodies, achieved not through sight alone, but an embodied, corporeal know-*how*. Thus, both Crossley and Ingold push for an understanding of social relations not as intersubjective but as intercorporeal. The intercorporeal understanding of the sociality of walking down the street also moves the story from rules and codes to bodily dispositions and inclinations that expose there is a direct interrelation

---

> shared] and friendship is the name of this "con-division." This sharing has nothing whatsoever to do with the modern chimera of intersubjectivity, the relationship between subjects. Rather, being itself is divided here, it is nonidentical to itself, and so the I and the friend are the two faces, or the two poles, of this con-division or sharing. (Agamben 2009: 34, emphasis in original)

Through Aristotle's and Agamben's words we get a sense of the metaphysical, and also corporeal and sensual intertwining of lives with other lives.

between my body and the other's body. As important as these critiques are, we can go further. It is not simply the case that we do not often bump into other bodies when walking down the street simply because of the social rules, norms, or practical sense we have of other bodies. More basically, the failure to move out of the way of a person making their way in the world is an ethical failure to recognize the other and grant them the tiny space they require to pass through. These acts of opening one's body to allow someone through, or the slowing of one's gait to create an opening for a passerby, are, more often than not, done with little attention or thought; prereflexively, the fluctuations of rhythms and tempos of one's body, the continual adjustments of one's body in relation to the bodies and lives of others, ground the possibility of others being able to make their way in the world. It is the complex weaving of intentionalities, bodies, and lives through the lives of others in the everyday which must be thought of in much more ethical terms (cf. Al-Mohammad 2012).

These theoretical elaborations are ones that resonate with my own experiences in Iraq where I was continually drawn to how persons who seemingly have little or no relation to one another, through their everyday practices, behaviors, and the paths they took to get to various places, their lives entangled with others precisely through these barely perceptible gestures and movements. If I turn to my first few days in Basra, I remember one occasion wandering around the edges of the center looking to buy some fruit to share with the hotel workers later that evening. I found a fruit and vegetable stall on my way that seemed to be run by a relatively young woman no older than in her mid-twenties. As I was looking at the fruit deciding what to buy, the stall owner screamed, shouted, and then started to insult me. I was mortified. I felt embarrassment and anger at this public humiliation. I was new to Iraq and did not know how to react. I walked away hurriedly as if I had done something wrong.

Weeks later I was walking with Abu-Hibba. Even in those early days it felt as if we were close friends so I would walk with him whenever he had a chore; on this occasion Abu-Hibba wanted to buy some sweets for his children. As we were walking and talking I could see we were nearing the stall where the woman shouted at me. I asked Abu-Hibba where we were going. He pointed to the stall. I told him of what had happened to me; surely he would not shop from a place that had been so horrible to me? Abu-Hibba ignored me and told me to wait nearby and he would return in a few moments.

I was irritated with Abu-Hibba for ignoring my protestations—what sort of friend was he to ignore my humiliation at the hand of the person working behind the stall? I had worked myself into quite a state by the time Abu-Hibba had returned. I unleashed an initial volley of indignation hoping to arouse some contrition. Abu-Hibba told me to stop being so silly. I was stunned. After a brief moment of awkward silence he leaned toward me and told me to look closely at the stall. I saw the same woman who had shouted at me; I also noticed some young children. Abu-Hibba told me to look closer. I made out an old man who sat on a low stool or crate behind the stall, almost hidden against the wall that the stall rested on to its side. That was her father. Abu-Hibba told me the young woman looks after her whole family. He told me of how her father had been beaten badly years previously and had suffered brain damage, and how her mother had died when she was still a teenager. For more than a decade the young woman was both

provider and carer. I found out later that the young children working on the stall were orphans and children living on the streets. The woman who ran the stall took as many of the children she could and would feed, clothe, and house them.

I had not noticed any of this. Abu-Hibba went on: "We have lived through the years of her troubles, and what she has done for her family. We have seen how many young lives depend on her . . . so, whenever I, or others like me can, we try to buy something from her stall. . . . She shouts at all of us . . . she's tired. . . . People try to rob and cheat her daily . . . years ago she was shot at to intimidate her in the hope she would give up the profitable stall." It was not only Abu-Hibba, but many more, whose daily grocery shopping or meanderings through the streets that happened to take them to that particular stall and indulgently buy some fruit or sweets for the household, or for some friends or neighbors.

Moreover, it was not this one stall but many, which Basrans frequented in a small gesture to keep a family in business, or to stand with them against intimidation. Outside a formalized system of caring for others, Basrans in their everyday trajectories responded as much as they were able or inclined, to the suffering and needs of others—sometimes even anonymous others. However, to return to the Goffmanian picture of lives making their way amid the lives of others, it should not be overlooked that Iraqis *do* bump into others in the everyday. Sometimes through neglect and indifference, other times because of acts of petty violence, and sometimes even through outright violence. Abu-Hibba and other Iraqis are not mythical or heroic figures; many help the people they can, but also, at times, they can be indifferent to the pain and suffering of others. Nevertheless, in not marking off the ethical as a separate or partial domain, but as intrinsic to the ways in which lives make their way through, against, and with others, an *ethics of the rough ground* is one that is not a moral perfectionism, but grounded in the ambiguous, complex, and vacillating inclinations of life toward the lives of others (cf. Das forthcoming).

Conclusion

The ability of Iraqis to survive the two recent gulf wars, the crippling twelve years of sanctions, and the violence and deprivation of life after the invasion points to some of the courage, relentless battling, and "talent for life" (Scheper-Hughes 2008) it has taken to maintain one's own life, and those one cares for and looks after. It is in these complex entanglements and threading of lives through the lives of others that we have tried to think through in much more ethical terms.

At the heart of this article is an attempt to move accounts about life in postinvasion Iraq beyond destruction and collapse to understandings of the ways in which Iraqis in their everyday forms of dwelling are not only making and remaking a world for themselves, but also each other amid tremendous daily pressures and struggles. This continual weaving and reweaving of the lines of life through the lines of others come with no guarantees. Many Iraqis have died needlessly when even the most basic of provisions or help could have saved them. An understanding of ethics proposed in this article does not exclude some of the callousness, violence, and indifference of everyday life, hence the *rough ground* of the ethics described throughout. Nor does violence and terror, however, threaten the very fabric of the ethics and forms of dwelling discussed. Rather, an ethics of the *rough ground* is

one that does not oppose violence to the mundane, or the ethical to "evil"; instead, it focuses on the complex corporeality and vacillations of the inclinations and movements of lives toward others.

As outlined in Goffman's analysis of pedestrians, the possibility of others making their way in the world, in some small way is contingent on one's ability, and even willingness, to grant the other some of the space one inhabits with a faint gesture, change of gait, or posture. What we have insisted throughout is that it must not be overlooked how the possibilities and limitations of life itself are distributed along the lives of others. Furthermore, the distribution of and overlappings of lives must be taken as a provocation to think of life and its everyday forms as an ongoing and precarious *ethical* struggle. That is, ethics is not something merely granted to life and its everyday; it is both concealed and explicit in the everyday negotiations, challenges, and strivings for life and voice in postinvasion Iraq.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *The coming community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

——. 2009. *"What is an apparatus?" and other essays*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Ahtisaari, Martii. 1991. "Report on humanitarian needs in Iraq in the immediate post-crisis environment by a mission to the area led by the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management, 10–17 March 1991." New York: United Nations.

Al-Ali, Nadje. 2005. "Reconstructing gender: Iraqi women between dictatorship, war, sanctions and occupation." *Third World Quarterly* 26 (4/5): 739–58.

Al-Jawaheri, Yasmin Husein. 2008. *Women in Iraq: The gender impact of international sanctions*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Al-Mohammad, Hayder. 2010a. "Relying on one's tribe: A snippet of life in Basra since the 2003 invasion." *Anthropology Today*, 26 (6): 23–26.

——. 2010b. "Towards an ethics of being-with: Intertwinements of life in post-invasion Basra." *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 75 (4): 425–46.

——. 2011a. "Not beating them, and not joining them: Political symbols and practices in Basra." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4 (3): 282–97.

——. 2011b. "'You have car insurance, we have tribes': Negotiating everyday life in Basra and the re-emergence of tribalism." *Anthropology of the Middle East* 6 (1):18–34.

——. 2012. "A kidnapping in Basra: The struggles and precariousness of life in postinvasion Iraq." *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (4):597–614.

Allawi, Ali A. 2007. *The occupation of Iraq: Winning the war, losing the peace*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Baracchi, Claudia. 2008. *Aristotle's ethics as first philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barakat, Sultan. 2005. "Post-Saddam Iraq: Deconstructing a regime, reconstructing a nation." *Third World Quarterly*, 26 (4/5): 571–91.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1989. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bensahel, Nora, Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Richard R. Brennan, Jr., Heather S. Gregg, Thomas Sullivan, and Andrew Rathmell. 2008. *After Saddam: Prewar planning and the occupation of Iraq*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Arroyo Center.

Benson, Peter, and Kevin Lewis O'Neill. 2007. "Facing risk: Levinas, ethnography, and ethics." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 18 (2): 29–55.

Bissett, Andrew. K. 2003. "High technology war and 'surgical strikes'." *SIGCAS Computer Society* 33 (4): 95–118.

Boyle, Michael J. 2009. "Bargaining, fear, and denial: Explaining violence against civilians in Iraq 2004–2007." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21 (2): 261–87.

Cardosa, Amy V. 2007. *Iraq at the crossroads*. New York: Nova Science.

Casey, Edward. S. 2007. *The world at a glance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Cockburn, Patrick. 2009. *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Shia insurgency in Iraq*. London: Faber.

Cook, Joanna. 2010. *Meditation in modern Buddhism: Renunciation and change in Thai monastic life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cordesman, Anthony H., and Emma R. Davies. 2008. *Iraq's insurgency and the road to civil conflict*. Westport: Praeger Security International.

Crossley, Nick. 1995. "Body techniques, agency and intercorporeality: On Goffman's relations in public." *Sociology* 29 (1): 133–49.

Dannreuther, Roland. 1992. *The Gulf conflict: A political and strategic analysis*. London: Brassey's for the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. forthcoming. "Ordinary ethics: The perils and pleasures of everyday life." In *Anthropology of ethics*, edited by Didier Fassin. New York: Wiley-Blackwell

Davis, Eric. 2005. *Memories of state: Politics, history, and collective identity in modern Iraq*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dawod, Hosham. 2003. "The 'State-ization' of the tribe and the tribalization of the State: The case of Iraq." In *Tribes and power: Nationalism and ethnicity in the Middle East*, edited by Faleh Abdul Jabar and Hosham Dawod, 110–35. London: Saqi.

Fassihi, Farnaz. 2009. *Waiting for an ordinary day: The unravelling of life in Iraq*. New York: Perseus Books Group.

Goffman, Erving. 2010. *Relations in public: Microstudies of the public order*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Goldstein, Eric, and Andrew Whitley. 1992. *Endless torment: The 1991 uprising in Iraq and its aftermath*. Washington: Middle East Watch.

Gordon, Michael R., and Bernard E. Trainor. 2007. *Cobra II: The inside story of the invasion and Occupation of Iraq*. New York: Vintage Books.

Green, Penny, and Tony Ward. 2009. "The transformation of violence in Iraq." *British Journal of Criminology* 49 (5): 609–27.

Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ingold, Tim. 2004. "Culture on the ground: The world perceived through the feet." *Journal of Material Culture* 9 (3): 315–40.

Ismael, Tareq Y., and Jacqueline S. Ismael. 2005. "Whither Iraq? Beyond Saddam, sanctions and occupation." *Third World Quarterly* 26 (4): 609–29.

Kant, Immanuel. (1788) 2002. *Critique of practical reason*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Katzman, Kenneth. 2009. *Iraq: Post-Saddam governance and security*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Kwon, Heonik. 2010. "The ghosts of war and the ethics of memory." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 400–414. New York: Fordham University Press.

Lambek, Michael, ed. 2010. *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel, and Richard Kearney. 1986. "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas." In *Face to face with Levinas*, edited by Richard A. Cohen, 12–35. New York: State University of New York Press.

Lewis, Paul. 1991. "After the war: U.N. survey calls Iraq's war damage near-apocalyptic." *New York Times*, March 22.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Makiya, Kanan. 1989. *Republic of fear: The inside story of Saddam's Iraq*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 2008. "A talent for life: Reflections on human vulnerability and resilience." *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 73 (1): 25–56.

Sellars, Wilfred. 1963. *Science, perception, and reality*. New York: Humanities Press.

Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Synnott, Hillary. 2008. *Bad days in Basra: My turbulent time as Britain's man in southern Iraq*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1953) 2007. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 1967. *Zettel*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2007. "Moral breakdown and the ethical demand: A theoretical framework for an anthropology of moralities." *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): 131–50.

———. 2009. "Morality and personal experience: The moral conceptions of a muscovite man." *Ethos* 37: 78–101.

L'éthique et le « terrain accidenté » du quotidien: chevauchements de vies en Iraq après l'invasion

Résumé : Au delà des histoires d'effondrement, de dévastation et d'incertitude éthique reflétées dans l'histoire récente de l'Iraq, nous y trouvons aussi des récits de connexions, de relations et d'enchevêtrement de vies, au nom de la famille et de l'amitié. Des comportements tels que l'affection, l'attention, l'entretien et même l'amour de l'autre n'ont pas encore été intégrés aux modes d'écriture et de réflexion sur la vie suite à l'invasion. Dans cet article, les auteurs éclairent la manière dont la vie des Iraquiens est non seulement liée aux formes et structures d'obligations tribales et de sectarisme, de violence et de destruction par la terreur, mais aussi liée aux « terrains accidentés » des rencontres et affaires quotidiennes. Ils affirment que c'est justement au sein de ces connexions et relations de vies et d'intentionnalités que réside l'éthique intercorporelle du « terrain accidenté » du quotidien. Celle-ci peut être comprise non seulement par l'ouverture à la douleur, la souffrance, la joie et l'ennui de l'autre, mais aussi par l'émergence du soin et du souci pour l'autre, et les formes d'entretien et d'épuisement de ceux-ci.

Hayder AL-MOHAMMAD is an anthropologist who works on Iraq and the Middle East.

Daniela PELUSO is a cultural anthropologist who over the last two decades has conducted fieldwork in Lowland South America, the United States and the United Kingdom. Her current research addresses workplaces practices and ethics of the everyday. She has been involved in various local efforts on issues relating to health, gender, indigenous urbanization, and land-rights and works in close collaboration with indigenous and local organizations in Bolivia and Peru. She received her PhD from Columbia University and is a Senior Lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Kent.